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His father's voice rumbled beside him, and Max turned in his seat.

"*Not* that one," he said. "It's way too cheesy."

"It's not cheesy," he protested, squinting at the ad and smoothing his tuft of thinning brown hair. "What's *cheesy* about it?"

“But that’s the whole point!” interrupted his father, waving the flimsy ad about. “Ambrosia is the first ‘ultra-premium’ dish soap! A heavenly rather than soft enough for the tub, but still has muscle for the toughest—”

Max flushed. “Dad...”

"It's not so bad," Max reassured him. "Maybe you could just make her smile a little less toothy."

Thunder shook the car and the train started to move again. The passengers shrieked and laughed as the cabin went dark. Max squeezed his father's arm, and the train's yellow lights flickered slowly back to life. The rain fell harder now as they neared Chicago, a looming backdrop of steel and brick set in stark relief against the summer storm.

Max was still grinning when he saw the man.

Max turned away for a moment, swiveling for a better look. He caught his breath.

The man was staring at him.

But Max knew somehow that this eye was not blind or dead. He knew he was being studied by it—appraised in the way his mother used to examine a glass of wine or an old photograph. Holding Max's gaze, the man eased his head up off the glass and shifted his weight toward the aisle.

"You falling asleep on me, Max? Get your things together—we're here, kiddo."

The station was crowded with people milling to and from platforms. Voices droned over loudspeakers; weekend shoppers scurried about with bags and children in tow. Mr. McDaniels steered Max down the escalator toward the exits. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still threatening.

“The Art Institute, please,” said his father.

Max craned his neck, straining to glimpse the tops of the skyscrapers as the cab headed east toward the lake.

“Dad,” said Max. “Did you see that man on the train?”

“Which man?”

“He was sitting across the aisle in the row behind us,” Max said, shuddering.

“No, I don’t think so,” said his father, flicking some lint off his raincoat. “What was so special about him?”

“I don’t know. He was scary-looking and he was staring at me. He looked like he was going to say something or come over right before we went into the tunnel.”

“Well, if he was staring at you, it’s probably because you were staring at him,” said Mr. McDaniels. “You’ll see more kinds of people in the city, Max.”

“I know, Dad, but—”

“You can’t judge a book by its cover, you know.”

“I *know*, Dad, but—”

“Now, there’s this guy at my office. Young kid, still wet behind the ears. Well, my first day I see this kid at the coffee machine with makeup on his eyes, a harpoon through his nose, and music blaring out of his headphones...”

Max looked out the taxi's window while his father retold a familiar tale. Finally, Max caught a glimpse of what he had been looking for: two bronze lions standing tall and proud as they flanked the museum entrance.

“Dad, there’s the Art Institute.”

“Right you are, right you are. Oh, before I forget,” Mr. McDaniels said, turning to Max with a sad little smile on his broad face. “Thanks for coming with me today, Max. I appreciate it. Your mom appreciates it, too.”

Max offered a solemn nod and gave his dad's hand a fierce squeeze. The McDanielses had always celebrated Bryn McDaniels's birthday with a visit to her favorite museum. Despite his mother's disappearance over two years ago, Max and his father continued the tradition.

Once inside, they asked a young woman with a nametag where they could find some of Bryn McDaniels's favorite artists. Max listened as his father rattled off the names from a slip of paper: Picasso, Matisse, and van Gogh came handily enough, but he paused when he came to the last.

"Gaw-gin?" he asked, twisting up his face and frowning at the paper.

“Gauguin. He’s a wonderful artist. I think you’ll enjoy his work.” The woman smiled and directed them to a large marble staircase leading to the second floor.

“Your mom sure knows all the names. I’ve got no head for this stuff no matter how many times I come here.” Mr. McDaniels chuckled and smacked Max on the shoulder with the map.

The galleries upstairs were filled with color—great swirls of paint layered thickly on canvas and board. Mr. McDaniels pointed to a large painting of pedestrians on a rainy Paris street.

“That looks a bit like today, eh?”

“The rain does, but to look like him you’d have to add a mustache and top hat,” Max mused, squinting at a figure in the foreground.

“Ugh! I used to have a mustache. Your mother made me shave it when we started dating.”

Some images dominated whole walls, while others nestled in small gilded frames. They spent an hour or so moving from painting to painting, careful to spend extra time at Mrs. McDaniels's favorites. Max particularly liked a Picasso in which a weathered old man cradled a guitar. He was studying the painting when he heard his father exclaim behind him.

“Bob? Bob Lukens! How are you?”

Max turned to see his father pumping the arm of a thin, middle-aged man in a black sweater. A woman accompanied him, and the two were offering hesitant smiles as Mr. McDaniels cornered them.

"Hello, Scott. Nice to see you," the man said politely. "Honey, this is Scott McDaniels. He works on the Bedford Bros. account...."

“Oh, what a nice surprise. Pleased to meet you, Scott.”

"They'll change the way you think about soup!" Mr. McDaniels boomed, shooting a finger toward the ceiling.

Mrs. Lukens gave a start and dropped her purse.

The guard was backed against the doorway, looking the man up and down. He began to reach for his radio. But then the strange man leaned in close and hissed something Max could not hear. Inexplicably, the guard nodded and hooked a fat thumb over his shoulder toward the suits of armor where Max was hiding.

Frantic, Max scanned his surroundings and noticed a dark doorway directly to his right. A velvet rope hung across it along with a sign that read UNDER REPAIR: PLEASE KEEP OUT.

Ignoring the sign, Max ducked beneath the rope and melted around the corner. He stood rigid against the wall and waited for his hiding place to be discovered. Nothing happened. It was several long seconds before Max realized that he had left his sketchbook in the other gallery. A wave of panic crashed over him; surely the man would see it and guess where Max had hidden.

A minute passed, followed by another, and another. Max heard the footsteps and casual conversation of people strolling past the doorway. He peered around the corner. The man was gone—along with Max's sketchbook. Sinking slowly to the floor, Max pictured his name and address penciled neatly on the inside cover. He lifted his head and cast a hopeless glance at the room that had hidden him.

It was surprisingly small for a gallery. The air was musty, and the room had a soft amber glow. The sole object within it was a ragged tapestry that hung on the opposite wall. Max blinked. As strange as it seemed, the dim light was radiating from the tapestry itself. He moved closer.

The tapestry was an ancient thing. Sun and centuries had sapped its color until all that remained were splotched and faded bands of ochre. As he got closer, however, Max noticed faint hints and undercurrents of color submerged beneath its dull, rough surface.

His stomach began to tingle as though he'd swallowed a handful of bees. The little hairs on his arm rose one by one, and Max stood still, breathing hard.

Twang!

A single thread burst into bright gold. Max yelped and jumped backward. The thread flashed like fire, as fine and delicate as spider silk. It vibrated like a harp string, issuing a single musical note that reverberated throughout the gallery before fading to silence. Max glanced back at the doorway. Patrons continued to stroll by, but they seemed far away and oblivious to the small gallery, its lone occupant, and the strange tapestry.

More threads came to life, plucked from their slumber in a rising chorus of light and music. Some arrived individually, in a sudden snap of light and sound; others emerged together in woven harmonies of silver, green, and gold. To Max, it seemed he had dusted off an alien instrument that now resumed a strange and forgotten song. The song became richer. When the last thread sang into being, Max gave a sudden gasp of pain. The pain was sharper than a stitch and was caused by something deep within him.

That something had been with Max ever since he could remember. It was a lurking presence, huge and wild, and Max was afraid of it. Throughout his life he had fought with great difficulty to keep it walled within him. The struggles caused headaches, including unbearable stretches that lasted for days. Max knew those days were over as he felt the presence burst free. Unfettered at last, it glided slowly through his consciousness before sounding deep within his being to stir the silt.

The pain subsided. Max took a deep breath while tears ran free in warm little rivers down his face. He brushed the tapestry's woven surface with his fingers.

The light and colors shifted to form golden, interlacing patterns that framed three strange, glowing words near the top.

TÁIN BÓ CUAILNGE

Centered below these words was the beautifully woven image of a bull in a pasture surrounded by dozens of sleeping warriors. A host of armed men were approaching from the right; a trio of black birds wheeled in the sky above. Overlooking the scene from a nearby hill was the silhouette of a tall man clutching a spear.

Max's eyes swept over the picture, but they always returned to the dark figure on the hill. Slowly, the tapestry's light grew brighter; its images trembled and danced behind shimmering waves of heat. With a rising cacophony of sound, the tapestry erupted with radiance so hot and bright Max feared it would consume him.

“Max! Max McDaniels!”

The room was dark once again. The tapestry hung against the wall, dull and ugly and still. Max backed away, confused and frightened, and crossed the velvet rope into the medieval gallery.

He saw his father's hulking figure alongside two security guards at the far end of the gallery. Max called out. At the sound of Max's voice, Mr. McDaniels raced toward his son.

“Oh, thank God! Thank God!” Mr. McDaniels wiped away tears as he stooped to smother Max in the folds of his coat. “Max, where on *earth* have you been? I’ve been looking for you for the last two hours!”

“Dad, I’m sorry,” Max said, baffled. “I’m okay. I was just in that other room, but I haven’t been gone more than twenty minutes.”

“What are you talking about? What other room?” Mr. McDaniels’s voice quavered as he peered over Max’s shoulder.

The one that's under repair," replied Max, turning to point out the sign. He stopped, began to speak, and stopped again. There was no doorway, no sign, and no velvet rope.

Mr. McDaniels turned to the two guards, offering each a firm handshake. As the guards moved beyond earshot, Mr. McDaniels kneeled to Max's height. His eyes were puffed and searching.

"Max, be honest with me. Where have you been for the last two hours?"

Max took a deep breath. "I was in a room off this gallery. Dad, I swear to you I didn't think I was in there very long."

"Where was this room?" asked Mr. McDaniels as he unfolded the museum map.

Max felt sick.

The room with the tapestry was simply not on the map.

"Max...I'm going to ask you this one time and one time only. Are you lying to me?"

Max stared hard at his shoes. Raising his eyes to his father's, he heard his own voice, soft and trembling.

"No, Dad. I'm not lying to you."

Before Max had finished the sentence, his father was pulling him briskly toward the exit. Several girls his age giggled and whispered as Max was dragged, feet shuffling and head bowed, out the museum entrance and down the steps.

The only sounds during the cab ride to the train station came from Mr. McDaniels thumbing rapidly through his pamphlets. Max noticed some were upside down or backward. The rain and wind were picking up again as the cab slowed to a halt near the train station.

"Make sure you've got your things," sighed Mr. McDaniels, exiting the other side. He sounded tired and sad. Max drooped and thought better of sharing the fact that he had also lost his sketchbook.

Once on the train, the pair slid heavily into a padded booth. Mr. McDaniels handed his return ticket to the conductor, then leaned back and closed his eyes. The conductor turned to Max.

"Ticket, please."

"Oh, I've got it right here," Max muttered absentmindedly. He reached into his pocket, but procured a small envelope instead. The sight of his name scripted clearly on the envelope made him pause.

Confused, Max retrieved the ticket from his other pocket and gave it to the conductor. Glancing to confirm that his father was still resting, Max then looked over the envelope. In the warm yellow light it appeared buttery, its heavy paper folds converging to pleasing corners. He turned the envelope over and examined the silky navy script.

Mr. Max McDaniels

His father now breathing heavily, Max ran his finger along the envelope's flap. Inside was a folded letter.

Dear Mr. McDaniels,

Our records indicate that you registered as a Potential this afternoon at 3:37 p.m. CST, U.S. Congratulations, Mr. McDaniels—you must be a very remarkable young man, and we look forward to making your acquaintance. One of our regional representatives will be contacting you shortly. Until that time, we would appreciate your absolute silence and utmost discretion in this matter.

Best regards,

Gabrielle Richter

Executive Director

Max read the note several times before stowing it back in his pocket. He felt utterly drained. He could not guess how the letter had come to be in his possession, much less what a "Potential" was and what it all had to do with him. He *could* guess it had something to do with the hidden tapestry and the mysterious presence now roaming free within him. Max stared out the window. Brilliant shafts of sunlight chased wispy trails of storm clouds across the western sky. Exhausted, he leaned against his father and drifted off to sleep, his fingers closed tight around the mysterious envelope.